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Preparing Early Childhood Teachers to Work With Young Dual Language Learners

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Abstract

Teacher preparation is clearly linked to the quality of early childhood programs. In order for young dual language learners (DLLs) to be academically successful, teacher preparation should focus on those skills and abilities relevant to students' particular needs. This article reviews the content of professional preparation for early educators working with young DLLs and briefly discusses the importance of developing the cultural and linguistic diversity of the early childhood workforce. It identifies 6 content areas: (a) understanding language development, (b) understanding the relationship between language and culture, (c) developing skills and abilities to effectively teach DLLs, (d) developing abilities to use assessment in meaningful ways for DLLs, (e) developing a sense of professionalism, and (f) understanding how to work with families.

Keywords

dual language learners; English language learners; early childhood; teacher preparation; diversity; workforce

Preparing early educators to work with the burgeoning dual language learner (DLL) population is increasingly attracting national attention. Recent reports focus on inadequate preparation in the professional standards of teacher accreditation bodies, a lack of clear guidance by state boards of higher education, and the paucity of pertinent coursework in higher education (Ray, Bowman, & Robbins, 2006a, 2006b). Nationwide, an increasing number of children reside in households where English is not the primary language of the family (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003), and these numbers are projected to grow (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction, 2007). Within this, changing child population landscape, the relationship between high-quality preschool experiences and child outcomes—particularly for children from low-income households (Bowman, Donvan, & Burns, 2001; Heckman & Masterov, 2004; Reynolds, 2003), many of whom are DLLs (Gromley, 2007)—is particularly noteworthy. Given the demographic changes and the role of high-quality practices in promoting young

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children's development and learning, there is an urgency regarding the requisite knowledge and skill base to prepare early educators to work effectively with young children and their families whose home language is not English. Both administrators of early childhood programs (Buysse, Castro, West, & Skinner, 2005) and teachers (Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005; Ryan, Ackerman, & Song, 2005) have identified the lack of adequate professional preparation to work effectively with DLLs as a major challenge. The purpose of this article is to briefly review the literature on the content of professional preparation for early educators working with DLLs and discuss the importance of developing the cultural and linguistic diversity of the early care and education workforce.

TEACHING STANDARDS FOCUSING ON LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

In the past, many national and state entities charged with oversight and direction for early childhood teacher preparation had not singled out the DLL population for special consideration. In some cases, teacher education about DLLs was included under the poorly defined umbrella concept of "diversity" (Ray et al., 2006a). More recently, professional organizations have revised their standards to include a stronger DLL focus. For example, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the primary national accreditation body for P–12 pre-service education, although previously criticized for minimizing its focus on diversity (Tellez & Waxman, 2008), has developed a specific criteria (e.g., Standard 4) stressing diversity as an integrated approach across curricular content areas and specific knowledge of DLLs. This includes a strength-based emphasis toward cultural and linguistic diversity, knowledge of first and second language acquisition, and sensitivity in working with culturally and linguistically diverse families (NCATE, 2008). Also, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), in conjunction with NCATE, is currently revising their set of expectations for P–12 English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher education (TESOL Task Force on ESL Standards, 2008). These standards include understanding the complexities in first and second language and literacy development; the relationships between culture and language development, including identity issues; specific pedagogical strategies to support the development of English; the use of appropriate resource materials; understanding appropriate and authentic assessment for DLL populations; and the development of professionalism.

In the early childhood education arena, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), whose focus is on children from birth through age 8, adopted a position statement in 1995 (NAEYC, 1995) that unequivocally asserted the importance of children's home language in their overall development. Specifically, NAEYC indicates that children's home language does not interfere with their ability to learn English and that knowing more than one language is an asset and not a limitation to their developmental progress. In NAEYC's accreditation standards for the preparation of early educators at the associate and baccalaureate levels, language diversity is subsumed under the term *culture* and is referenced in three of the five major standard's categories: (a) the promotion of child development and learning, (b) building family and community relationships, and (c) teaching and learning (Hyson, 2003).

The National Board of Professional Teaching Standards has adopted a specific criteria for the Early and Middle Childhood and English as a New Language certification with two paths: one for educators stressing bilingual language development and the other for individuals specializing in helping children gain proficiency in English to access content across the curriculum (see http://www.nbpts.org). The Association for Childhood Education International's (ACEI) position article on teacher preparation mentions the need to accommodate the interests of young children in a diverse society (ACEI, 1998); however, a more current document on global guidelines for early education and care emphasizes diversity as an important element of quality programs (ACEI, 2006).

From this overview, it is clear that there is range of emphasis on issues of diversity, including linguistic diversity, from professional organizations that guide and influence teacher preparation and professional development. However, regardless of the degree of emphasis they place on understanding linguistic diversity, professional organizations interested in teacher preparation have concluded that preparation should focus on five major content areas that range from understanding the processes underlying first and second language acquisition to the importance of working with families. The following sections describe these five areas.

Understanding Language Development

Although an obvious component of teacher preparation for working with DLLs is information about first and second language acquisition in young children and appropriate pedagogical approaches, programs fail to systematically offer these topics to early educators. A national study of early childhood teacher preparation found that curricular content focused on working with bilingual children was the least likely subject to be covered as part of a practicum in any of the levels of degrees offered (Maxwell, Lim, & Early, 2006). Consistent with this finding, a survey of California's early childhood workforce found that only approximately one third of early childhood centers reported that their teachers had noncredit or college coursework that "focused on dual language learning in young children, despite the growing numbers of young children in California who speak a language other than English in their homes" (Whitebook et al., 2006, p. 95). It should not be surprising that in a study of New Jersey preschool teachers, only about one third reported that they feel adequately prepared to teach DLLs (Ryan et al., 2005).

To meet the increasing expectations for language and literacy performance in preschool, early educators must have a fundamental understanding of the underlying mechanisms of language development and must understand language as a system of communication (TESOL Task Force on ESL Standards, 2008). Additionally, early educators need to know the stages of second language acquisition that occur as young children learn English (Tabors, 2008) so that they are better able to make grounded pedagogical choices (see Resource Guide by the California State Department of Education, 2007; Nuestros Niños Early Language and Literacy Program by Castro, Gillanders, Machado-Casas, & Buysse, 2006).

Understanding the Relationship Between Language and Culture

As with understanding basic first and second language acquisition, understanding the linkage between language and culture should be a strong component of teacher preparation for working with DLLs. Research is clear that language develops within the context of a child's home culture and that a culture's values and beliefs influence how and when a child is to use language (Heath, 1989), how children are perceived as language partners (Bavin, 1995; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), and the importance of language for maintaining a healthy ethnic identity (Sanchez & Thorp, 1998; Zentella, 2005).

It is also important to take into consideration that young DLLs have the multidimensional task of learning the oral domains (vocabulary, phonology, syntax, and pragmatics) and the literacy-related domains (phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print conventions) of a new language, at the same time that they are learning the social rules of interpersonal relationships and a set of beliefs and values that may be different from those they learned at home. It is essential that teachers understand the complexities of how the various domains of development and learning unfold in young DLLs to be able to design and implement effective classroom practices. With the new language, young DLLs are learning a new culture; how positive or negative the experience will have a strong influence on their future success in school and in life.

Developing Skills and Abilities to Effectively Work With DLLs

Effective teaching for young DLLs requires targeted classroom supports, including special attention to vocabulary development and an intentional focus on English language and literacy development (Fillmore & Snow, 2000). Research syntheses and evaluation studies show that all children tend to benefit from high-quality instruction, including those whose primary language is not English, particularly when they are at the beginning stages of learning English (Goldenberg, 2008). In general, high-quality instruction is characterized by better trained early childhood personnel, small child to staff ratios, and greater intensity of services (Rand Corporation, 2009), including strong supervision and oversight to maintain high standards (Barnett & Hustedt, 2003). Research also has found that to reach sustained levels of gains, and, in some cases, to reach the same level of gains as their English-speaking peers, DLLs may need additional support or instructional accommodations (Shanahan & Beck, 2006), especially in classrooms where instruction is conducted only in English. For instance, although English-speaking children will benefit from a language-based explanation of a story for learning new vocabulary, DLLs may need added visual representation of the concept to gain the same level of understanding (Goldenberg, 2008). The strategic use of the child's first language as a tool to support learning is another accommodation found to be helpful when teaching DLLs. A major challenge in teaching DLLs is to promote acquisition of knowledge while teaching the English language. Using the first language will help children to understand meanings of concepts and to develop comprehension that they can transfer to vocabulary in English (see Resource Guide by the California State Department of Education, 2007).

Developing Abilities for Meaningful Assessment of DLLs

Because learning a second language during the formative years is a complex process, reliable and meaningful assessment of preschool DLLs is an essential component of teacher preparation. Teachers need to be able to relate stages of second language learning to specific pedagogical accommodations. Because there is great variability among DLLs with regard to the rate and the manner in which they learn a second language, teachers must be aware of important factors influencing the process of second language learning. These include child factors such as age, motivation, personality, and first language proficiency; program/school factors such as instructional approaches and teacher preparation; and sociocultural factors such as poverty, familial stress, and incongruence between home and school environments. Assessment of young DLLs often must include input from family members and other professionals to adequately understand the child's level of conceptual knowledge in their first and second language. Espinosa and Lopez (2007) have developed a helpful review on this subject, and the recommendations by NAEYC (2005) regarding appropriate assessment for DLLs provide specific policy recommendations.

Developing a Sense of Professionalism

Teacher preparation competencies for early educators often mention the importance of the development of a sense of professionalism. Professionalism refers to a set of ethics that guide behavior and practice. With respect to young DLLs, early educators should be advocates for sound pedagogical practices that are in the best interest of the child. According to Goodwin (2002), teacher preparation focused on immigrant students, the majority of whom speak English as a second language, should concentrate on three aspects. First, teachers should make an effort to familiarize themselves with appropriate resources, materials, and community organizations that can assist in their understanding of DLLs. Second, teachers must be prepared to inform themselves about the sociopolitical context that surrounds the education of DLLs to be responsive to questions from parents and other professionals as well as to ethically ground their pedagogical decisions. Third, teachers should develop a consciousness about the biases that surround DLLs and experience opportunities for self-reflection and analysis to counteract negative stereotypes that often characterize DLLs.

Understanding How to Work With Families

Establishing partnerships with families is a very important characteristic of high-quality early education programs. When working with young DLLs, it becomes crucial for the teacher to establish good communication and collaboration skills with families to learn about the child and the values and beliefs of the family. Early educators need to learn from families about their strengths and assets, their expectations and views about their children's development, and the child's early experience in the home. This information will help teachers build a bridge between the home and the school cultures, which will foster the DLL's healthy socioemotional development and promote his or her school readiness (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Jeynes, 2003; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001).

DEVELOPING A DIVERSE WORKFORCE

There is a growing recognition that to develop a culturally and linguistically diverse workforce, we must take deliberate and intentional steps (Calderon, 2005; Matthews, 2008). High-quality preschool programs must include an explicit commitment to preserving diversity in the workforce that is paralleled by efforts in higher education to develop coursework addressing the needs of DLLs and professional organization initiatives to diversify the leadership of the early childhood education field. As formal education requirements have increased for early childhood educators, there is a growing concern that the current diverse workforce, many of whom are able to speak the home language of the children with whom they work, may be unable to qualify (Calderon, 2005; Whitebook et al., 2006).

The current workforce consists of “nontraditional learners” who are often in their 30s or 40s; many are the first in their families to attend college, many are working full-time and have significant family obligations (Saluja, Early, & Clifford, 2002), and many may come into formal higher education with unrealistic expectations or fears about what it takes to attain more education (Ackerman, 2005). To meet the needs of the present workforce while encouraging diversity, a number of approaches are useful. One approach that has a longstanding legacy is the Child Development Associate certification process (see http://www.cdacouncil.org). This certification involves taking coursework, developing a professional portfolio, being observed in the classroom, taking a written test, and participating in an interview, which can be done in English or Spanish or bilingually. Another approach to developing a culturally and linguistically diverse workforce is the use of dedicated cohorts that bring together small groups of early educators to study, attend classes that are conveniently scheduled for working adults, and make use of an array of support services such as tutoring and mentoring. In a survey of a number of cohort efforts taking place in California, researchers report that the group experience provides socioemotional and academic support as well as occasions for reflection about teaching (Whitebook et al., 2008).

CONCLUSION

Presently, one in five children in the United States is either foreign born or born to immigrant parents, and their numbers are growing faster than any other segment of the child population (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2007). This statistic suggests that many children will be entering early childhood settings speaking a language other than English. Because children whose home language is not English have more difficulty with school achievement than do other groups (Fry, 2007; Regalado, Goldenberg, & Appel, 2001), the role of teacher preparation in supporting DLLs’ development and learning is critical. Thus, a major focus of the DLL early education agenda must be to define the critical competencies of effective teachers that promote academic achievement in children (Gandara et al., 2005). Supporting young DLLs’ readiness for increasing academic expectations is a daunting educational challenge, one that is clearly related to the quality of the professional preparation that early educators receive (Gandara &Maxwell-Jolly, 2006; Garcia, Jensen, & Cuellar, 2006).

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